

BELMONT HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
February 5, 2003 7:00 PM
Town Hall
Meeting Minutes

Attending:

Commission Members: Richard Cheek and Lydia Ogilby, Co-chairs, Paul Bell, Linn Hobbs, Nancy Richards, Michael Smith, Sharon Vanderslice. Absent: Arleyn Levee, Richard Pichette, Jonathan Treat.

480 PLEASANT STREET

Amy Hiestand, owner of this circa 1914 stucco and clapboard gambrel-roofed house in the Pleasant Street Historic District, came before the Commission to informally discuss the possibility of replacing 20 original windows with insulated, aluminum-clad units made by Pella that use the same mullion pattern. If this was done, she would remove the existing storm windows. After extensive discussion, centering on whether it was appropriate to remove original sash and substitute windows using a different material, the Commission suggested that the owner explore the possibility of replacing her windows with all-wood sash and provided her with a list of firms that manufactured such windows.

483 PLEASANT STREET

Andy and Betty Salzman, owners of the Fletcher house, appeared before the Commission with revised drawings for a proposed kitchen addition to their home. As the Commission had requested in January, the Salzman's architect, Jane Langmuir, had inset the addition slightly so that the new cornice would not extend beyond the existing sidewall of the house. The new window trim, clapboards, cornerboards, and gutters will match those already on the house. Michael Smith said that the Commission appreciated the changes, but he had a question about the location of the downspout on the new addition. He asked that the owners check the water flow from the roof and find a way to keep the downspout on the back of the house. The Salzmans agreed to submit construction drawings in time to give two weeks notice to abutters of the property before seeking final approval from the Commission.

596 PLEASANT STREET

Eva Patalas, co-owner of this 1923 Dutch Colonial, is planning to renovate her kitchen without expanding the footprint of the house. The renovation will involve gutting the kitchen and two bathrooms. Patalas wants to replace five windows on the side and rear of the house, add a small window in the pantry, and change the size and proportion of the double kitchen window on the back of the house.

After studying the photographs and plan submitted by the owner and after determining that all sides of the house could be observed from the public way, the Commission encouraged her to replace her windows, where necessary, with all-wood sash reflecting the same mullion pattern. A list of manufacturers of true divided light windows was supplied to the owner.

The Commission determined that the enlargement of the double window in the kitchen and the insertion of a new window in the pantry represented a change in design that would require a Certificate of Appropriateness. The enlargement of the double window was considered to be inappropriate for the house, which is one of the few 1920s Dutch Colonial houses in Belmont to survive almost unchanged on all four sides. Small, cottage-sized windows are typical of this style, so modern window enlargements would be detrimental to the house's character. The introduction of a small window in the blank wall of the pantry, on the other hand, would be more in keeping with the spirit of the house's design.

DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR PLEASANT STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT

Linn Hobbs, who, at the request of Richard Cheek, recently completed a review of design guidelines from other towns, summarized his findings for the Commission. Hobbs said he read the guidelines for historic districts in Cambridge, Concord, Lexington, Salem, Somerville, Beacon Hill, and for the New Bedford Waterfront District. The Cambridge Historic District Commission, which has a budget of \$100,000 a year, has actually published a book on how to maintain an old house. The book repeatedly says that maintenance is cheaper than replacement, Hobbs noted. Concord's guidelines, which he described as "the gold standard," are 120 pages long. Sixty-five of those pages contain element-by-element guidelines for homeowners covering everything from lighting to landscaping. The publication also contains maps and photographs of actual houses in the district. Belmont's Historic District is less homogenous than Concord's, said Hobbs. For this reason, it may make sense for a Belmont guide to have an appendix on different house styles and their detailing. The Concord publication also includes the Massachusetts statute (Chapter 40C) that spells out the responsibilities of historic district commissions, the town bylaw on this subject, and the Secretary of the Interior's rehabilitation standards.

The town of Salem also has an element-by-element design guide. This guide has the added benefit of being easily revised because individual sections can be pulled out as necessary and updated. Salem received a grant from Yankee Magazine and the Trust for Historic Preservation to produce its guidelines.

Lexington's guidelines are brief and ad hoc. They cover specific items such as air conditioners and skylights.

New Bedford's guide contains a good summary of the federal guidelines. With regard to window replacements, it reads: "Replacement should only be considered when a window is too deteriorated to repair."

Hobbs said that a set of guidelines for Belmont should:

1. Give homeowners a sense of pride in the district and an understanding of how their individual house fits in. Maps and photographs are important.
2. Reprint Massachusetts Chapter 40C and the town's own by-law, which give "teeth" to the Commission's recommendations.
3. Contain a five-page summary of the Secretary of the Interior's standards.
4. Have element-by-element guidelines explaining what we generally approve and what we don't.
5. Contain a chapter on the appropriate design of additions.

With regard to windows, in particular, Hobbs found that in all of the design guidelines he consulted, the retention of original windows is preferred whenever possible. Beacon Hill, for example, permits no replacements at all unless the original is beyond repair. Salem specifies that if an original window must be replaced, the owner must salvage and reuse the old glass. None of the guidelines allows substitute materials such as aluminum or vinyl, and snap-in muntins are prohibited because they are too thin and can be too easily removed and broken.

The virtues of old windows, Hobbs emphasized, are their muntin size (usually thinner than modern windows), their wavy glass, and in some cases their colored glass. New windows always come with float glass, which has no imperfections, unlike the wavy glass that was produced by manufacturers in the Boston area between 1840 and 1925.

Commission members lauded Hobbs for his thoughtful and thorough review. A subcommittee was appointed to draft design guidelines for Belmont, which would begin with a table of contents and contain sections borrowed from guidelines published by other towns. Subcommittee members Nancy Richards, Linn Hobbs, and Chip Bell will complete the first draft. Michael Smith offered them the use of his office in Cushing Square.

TOWN HALL COMPLEX

Michael Smith gave an update on the design process. In the Town Hall, the building committee is trying to secure acoustical panels for the auditorium that match the paint color in that room. It is also looking for fabric for stage curtains and window draperies that closely resembles the original olive-colored material. The dormer windows on the rear of the building, which are not original, are in bad condition and need to be replaced. Smith recommended that any new windows match the existing aluminum ones on that side.

The landscaping plan is being scaled back in order to trim the budget. In addition, the lighting designer Bill Lamb is reducing the number of mushroom-style walkway lights. There will be no lights in the bollards. The path between the Town Hall and the School Administration Building will be eliminated.

PLEASANT STREET RECONSTRUCTION

Sharon Vanderslice summarized the results of a meeting held on January 24 to discuss the HDC's comments on this project with the project's engineering firm, BSC Group. The meeting was chaired by Tom Gatzunis, the town's building engineer, and was attended by Tree Warden Tom Walsh, the Shade Tree Committee, and two members of the HDC (Arleyn Levee and Sharon Vanderslice). The BSC Group was represented by Peter Briere, P.E., Project Manager, and Mary Beth Murphy, Landscape Architect.

Road width. Vanderslice asked whether the state's new Community Roadway Improvement Program would have any effect on the Pleasant Street design. Among other things, this program is intended to discourage road widenings in historic districts in order to save trees and stone walls. (Twenty four existing trees on Pleasant Street will be lost under the current plan, which is at the 75% design stage.) BSC reported that the state has selected ten projects for this program on a test basis, all of which have yet to be designed. If Belmont asked to be considered for this program, Pleasant Street would be knocked off the state's funding list for this year and construction would likely be delayed by several years. BSC engineer Peter Briere said he doubted that such a move would narrow the roadway by much. He said that BSC "fought for 1 ½ to 2 years to narrow it" and got the state to agree to reduce its standard travel-lane width by only six inches.

Stone walls. Levee asked that an item be placed in the contract that specifies that the foundations of existing stone walls not be undermined during construction and BSC agreed to do this. The contract will also specify that, whenever a stone wall is disturbed, it will be repaired with the existing stone and, where this is not possible, with stones of similar size, shape, and color. The one new wall to be constructed, in front of the Wolfson property near Snake Hill Road, will be cemented only on the back side and will appear dry from the street, said Briere.

Oversight. Levee asked who would be responsible for making sure that construction workers adhere to the project specs. This is a legitimate concern. Gatzunis said that once the job commences, it will be managed by an engineer for the state. A representative from the Belmont Highway Department or the Office of Community Development will attend a weekly job meeting.

Pavement. As for the paving material, BSC said the adding blue stone chips to the roadbed would make it too soft to bear the weight of the truck traffic. To gray down the color of the new sidewalks, BSC will specify that lampblack be added to the concrete.

Guard Rails. The HDC had requested that the guard rails to be installed on either side of the Clark Street Bridge be made of wood. The Massachusetts Highway Department refuses to do this, Briere said, because this project must meet federal standards and the one wooden guard rail that meets those standards (one designed for the National Park Service) is too expensive. Even the existing wooden guard rails next to the Shaw's Market will be replaced with steel. The state is specifying a rusting steel rail mounted on

wooden posts. Near the Clark Street Bridge, this guard rail will have a four- to five-foot-high chain link fence behind it. The chain link will be coated with black vinyl, as requested by the HDC.

Utilities. If any of the utility wires are buried, it must be done at the expense of the Municipal Light Department, which owns the utility poles from Trapelo Road to Leonard Street, Gatzunis said. The remainder of the poles are owned by NYNEX. The design of the light fixtures must also be discussed with the Light Department.

Trees. The 75% plan calls for new trees that are 3 to 3 ½ inches in diameter. The town's tree warden, Tom Walsh, thinks that three inches is too wide, and that street trees have a better chance of surviving if they are smaller in diameter when planted. One and one-half inch trees have a 98% success rate, he said. Walsh and Sinclair Weeks, of the Shade Tree Committee, said that it is better to go with 2 ½ to 3-inch trees for Pleasant Street. The contractor will guarantee the trees for only one year.

Pleasant Street, which is heavily salted, is a harsh environment for trees. Of the species suggested by the HDC, Walsh said that elm was historically accurate. Thornless and seedless honey locusts do well, as does green ash. Lindens do not survive wounds inflicted by cars, however, and pin oaks tend to get lots of dead branches. Red oaks, like those on Concord Avenue, grow more slowly. Walsh said that if we want a specific species of tree, it is important to order it from a nursery far in advance of the planting date. Otherwise the project manager will override the design specs when a tree is not immediately available. Valley Forge Elm, for instance, is difficult to find.

The BSC Group agreed to add trees to the bumpouts at the bottom of the Woman's Club driveway. Walsh suggested that a row of six elms be planted behind the stone wall on the club's property. Trees will be added in front of the DeMilia property on South Pleasant Street as part of site plan review, Gatzunis said, when that property is redeveloped at a later date.

Vanderslice and Levee asked whether the old trees in front of the Bell and Garfinkel properties could be saved. Briere agreed that these were beautiful trees, but said that they protrude too far out into the redesigned street. Mass Highway would never allow them to stay. Steep driveways on the opposite side of the street in that location prevent the designers from moving the pavement closer to that side. Walsh said that a "massive tree hearing" must be scheduled to discuss the Pleasant Street tree removals with the public.

Levee will have another meeting with BSC to discuss street plantings in more detail.

In response to Vanderslice's report, several HDC members said that a row of elms would not be appropriate in front of the Woman's Club because it would obscure the sloping expanse of lawn and the old copper beeches on the property.

Draft minutes of the January meeting were approved with certain amendments.

The Historic District Commission will meet next on Wednesday, March 5, in the Town Hall.

Minutes recorded by Sharon Vanderslice.